

Four Knots and Back

‘There could be sharks down there,’ said Richard.

‘Don’t say that word! Never say that word! And stop splashing about!’

‘I’m not,’ he shouted back. ‘Hey! Shall we dive down to see how deep it is?’

‘Are you insane?’

Ever since I’d had to rescue my pyjamas from the bottom of the swimming pool when I was five, I’d been afraid of deep water. The thought of how small, hopeless and insignificant I became — even in a swimming pool — terrified me. The sudden look of panic in my eyes made my friend realise there would be no diving today.

Richard was forging ahead with a nicely timed breaststroke that propelled him through the water like a slow-moving frigate towards the yellow buoy with 4 KNOTS written on it.

It wasn’t just the depth or the sharks that frightened me. It was the chain anchoring the buoy to the seabed. The long, thick, rusted chain snaking down into the darkness. How far did it go? And what was it attached to?

We approached it but didn't stop. 'Fuck that!' I cried out. 'I'm off.' So I simply prodded it with my fingers to register the accomplishment and turned back.

For a second, I thought of putting my head under the water to prove the chain really existed. Confront my fears. But I knew that one glimpse of the blackness would incite panic, and in the ocean, panic kills. Especially when there might be...no...don't say it. SHARKS.

'Stop splashing about. You'll attract sharks,' joked Richard.

Why did he have to say that? Why? It was all becoming too much. 'Let's get the hell out of here,' I cried.

I looked to the shore hoping to see life. But all I saw were dots. People and umbrellas and kites and inflatable dinghies, just multicoloured dots painted onto a band of yellow.

We were miles away. Further than I thought. I felt a cramp in my left foot. Cramp kills in water. Keep calm. It's just a bit of cramp. Lactic acid build-up in the muscles. It's nothing, just chemistry, I kept telling myself.

'Richard, are you cold?'

He nodded.

We kept swimming through the thick, oily water, battling against the outgoing tide which I could feel pushing against my legs and arms. Why did we do this? It looked so easy from the shore. 'Let's swim to the buoy,' I'd said. What an idiot.

Keep going. Keep going. Keep calm. You came out here, so you are going to have to get back. Or you die. It's quite simple.

'Richard, are you OK?

He nodded, and I kept swimming while thinking of other things. Anything to keep my mind off the deep sea, the sharks, and that long dark chain disappearing down into the bowels of fuck-knows-where!

Then I felt sand on my knees. The dots came into focus. I breathed an almighty sigh of relief.

As we walked back across the beach I expected a round of applause. But everyone just ate their sandwiches and ice creams and talked to their friends and family just as before. They were all totally oblivious to what we'd been through. We were just two lads getting out of the sea after a swim, nothing more.

If we'd slipped below the water, drowned, or been eaten by sharks, no one would have noticed. They would have all finished their sandwiches, trotted off back to their cars, gone home, and got on with their lives. The Earth would spin, the tides would turn, and the yellow buoy would remain floating in the sea.

And that, now I think about, back home warm and dry, is the scariest thing of all. To be simply not noticed...